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# Pride

*A Phi Beta Kappa Address*

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By

ELIJAH CLARENCE HILLS

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## PRIDE

By E. C. HILLS

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IN the early centuries of our era the Christian clergy, being possessed of only rather meager accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus, set to work to interpret and define the Scriptures, and there grew up a mass of decisions by church councils and bishops and commentaries by other learned churchmen, which had about the same relation to the Bible that the decisions of our Supreme Court bear to the Constitution of the United States. This work, ably begun by Saint Jerome, Saint Ambrose, Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Isidore of Seville, and others, was continued throughout the Middle Ages, and culminated in the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and especially in his *Summa Theologiae*, in which he sought to formulate a complete theological system of moral philosophy. As a result of this prolonged study, two beliefs came to be generally accepted by Christians: first, the belief in the existence of a Purgatory; and, second, the belief in the seven cardinal virtues and the seven cardinal sins.

The medieval Church believed in the logical necessity of a Purgatory, for it seemed inconceivable that the soul of a man who had sinned throughout most of his life and had repented in his last days, should be admitted directly into the presence of God without first being purged of the stains of sin. The seven virtues consisted of the four cardinal virtues of the ancient pagan philosophers, Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude and Justice, to which were added the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love or Charity. Opposed to these were the seven cardinal sins. As early as the sixth century, in the *Moralia* of Saint Gregory the Great, the seven sins, or attributes of sin, were given in this order, beginning with the greatest: Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Sensuality or Lust. The first three are sins of the intellect, and are, therefore, the greatest. The intermediate sin, Sloth, is based on indifference. The three lesser sins are of incontinence or lack of self-control, and do not necessarily have malice.

\* Phi Beta Kappa address at Indiana University, December 7, 1920.



Pride is the greatest of sins. It is the very foundation of all sin, inasmuch as sin consists in defying God's law. It should be said that the seven sins are such only when in excess. Thus, as certain drugs, when taken in small doses, are harmless and may even be healing, but are deadly poisons if taken in large quantities; so the seven sins may be salutary if used in moderation, but they become deadly sins when in excess. For instance, no one objects to a little honest pride, provided it be little and honest. We admire the honest pride of a child in a prize won at school, of a workman in labor well performed, of a mother in children well reared, of a patriot in the noble deeds of the heroes of his country. But overweening pride is sin.

Toward the close of the thirteenth century the Florentine poet, Dante Alighieri, undertook to write an allegorical account of a visit to the three regions of the dead, Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. In Dante's Hell the souls of the damned are tortured for specific crimes, but the souls in Purgatory are punished for some one of the seven fundamental sins. Thus, in the first ledge, the souls of those whose predominant sin on earth was pride are being purged of the stains of sin. As on earth they held their heads high, in Purgatory they go about the ledge with their heads bowed and with heavy weights on their backs. Beneath their feet are sculptured pictures illustrating stories of humility, that by having these ever before their eyes, the sinners may the sooner cast off all pride. When the purgation is complete, the soul rises of itself, automatically as it were, to Heaven. Dante accepts the order of sins given by Saint Gregory the Great, except that in the fifth ledge the prodigals are punished with the misers, for Dante held that prodigality is as great a sin as avarice. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante sums up and gives artistic expression to the teachings of the mediaeval schoolmen.

And now let us speak of Pride, which the medieval Christians, and also many churchmen today, hold to be the greatest of sins. The two common varieties of Pride are conceit and vanity. Conceit may be defined as an exalted opinion of self based on success in life, such as the writing of a great poem, the winning of battles, the accumulation of riches, and many lesser forms of success. Vanity may be defined as an exalted opinion of self based on circumstances over which one has no control, such as physical beauty, illustrious ancestry, inherited wealth. Of the two, vanity is the



greater sin. The commoner types of Pride are: pride of race, pride of family, pride of riches, and pride of intellect. Pride of race, or racial conceit as it is generally termed, persists in the modern world to a surprising degree in spite of our means of rapid communication. Thus the Frenchman considers the German cruel and boorish; the German considers the Frenchman vain and fickle; the American believes the Englishman to be dull and pompous, and the Englishman believes the American to be rude and nervous; the North American considers the South American passionate and frivolous, and the South American considers the North American sordid and ill-mannered. Now, of course, this is largely nonsense, but it is a kind of nonsense that is hard to down.

I sometimes think that our newspapers are partly responsible for our racial conceit. We read in them accounts of interviews with distinguished foreigners who praise the brightness of our sky, the beauty of our women, the energy of our men, and our great material prosperity, until we may be led to believe that most foreigners spend the greater part of their time in envious contemplation of our greatness. But when we pass over to Europe and read their papers, and especially those of the continent, we find that when America is mentioned it is usually in a cablegram giving an account of a tornado or a flood, the robbing of a railway train by bandits, or the lynching of negroes. America, then, when seen through foreign eyes, seems altogether different from what we had supposed it to be. But even during my short span of life there has been a marked change in the degree of our racial conceit. Formerly at the celebration of national holidays our orators shouted that we were the greatest nation on earth; but now thoughtful Americans are coming more and more to feel that in some respects we have fallen behind in the progress of the nations, and that after all we have much to learn from other countries. This is a hopeful sign and may lead to much good, for in the Proverbs we read: "He that despiseth his neighbor sinneth", and again: "He that despiseth his neighbor is void of wisdom".

Pride of family is a useful possession if it leads to the adoption of the motto "*noblesse oblige*" and if it stimulates its possessor to try to rival the noble deeds of his ancestors; but if he that has pride of family rests content with that which his father or his grandfather did, and does nothing himself for the betterment of mankind, then his pride is empty. The most extreme case of



family pride that I have met in my reading is that of Molly McBride,

Who was proud of herself, and proud of her pride,  
And proud of a thousand things beside  
That would not bear inspection.

The Spanish writer, Cervantes, compares some families of illustrious ancestry to pyramids, in that they are large at the foundation but taper to nothing. "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall".

Not all men of great riches have overweening pride. The few men of great material wealth whom I have been privileged to know personally were not, I think, especially proud. They were, rather, awed by a sense of their responsibility. But the rich are greatly tempted to lapse into the sin of pride, and when this occurs, it is often accompanied by a curious psychological phenomenon. Men of great riches are usually surrounded by those who praise them and show them great deference, and they may come to believe that the praise and deference are given to their personality and that they are different from other men, and they may fail to realize that if their riches were transferred to another, much of the praise and deference would follow the riches. "Behold, thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art the wretched one, and miserable and poor, and blind and naked".

And now let us speak of pride of intellect. I believe pride of intellect to be incompatible with great scholarship, for as one ascends the mount of knowledge and his horizon becomes broader and broader, he sees about him more and more of the great domain of knowledge that he has not explored and can not explore in his brief life, and he is of necessity awed in the presence of the great unknown. But men of learning are tempted to sink into the sin of pride. Victor Hugo was a forceful poet and novelist. It is said that he once told his friends that France was the greatest country on earth, Paris the greatest city in France, and he, Victor Hugo, the greatest man in Paris. If this story is true, I fear that Dante would have consigned Victor Hugo to the lowest circle in Hell, for there is no evidence that he ever repented. It seems to me that college undergraduates are especially tempted by the sin of pride. They are tempted to believe that they are superior to



those without the college walls; and within the college one group may believe itself better than another group. I have even known a student to criticize another on account of his walk, or his manner of bowing to ladies, or the way he tied his neckerchief. But take it all in all, I have often wished that our present-day college students had more of the pride of intellect, providing only it did not lead them to scoff at others.

Two passages in the Talmud characterize students so cleverly that I cannot refrain from quoting them:

"There are four classes of students. One is quick to learn and quick to forget: his gain is counterbalanced by his loss. One has difficulty in learning and difficulty in forgetting: his loss is rewarded by his gain. One is quick to learn and does not forget easily: this is a good portion. One has difficulty in learning and forgets easily: this is an evil portion . . ." And again: "There are four classes of students. One kind is like a sponge, another like a funnel, a third like a strainer, a fourth like a sieve. The sponge absorbs everything, the funnel loses from one end what is poured in at the other, the strainer lets out the wine and retains the dregs, the sieve separates the fine flour from the coarse."

I believe that we teachers are also especially tempted to lapse into pride of intellect. It is our task, and our privilege, to spend much of our time in the presence of younger people who know, presumably, less about our subjects than we do, and we may come to assume a tone of authority, or sometimes, I fear, of infallibility, toward our students. It seems to me that there are two ways by either one of which we teachers may avoid the sin of pride of intellect. One is to go out into the great world about us, and associate with men and women who know much more about many things than we do. The other is ever to have at hand some investigation, some piece of research work, some knotty problem that we are trying to solve. This makes us learners once more, and, while freshening our faculties, it brings us to realize our limitations. "Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight", said the prophet Isaiah.

The most harmful effect of Pride is scorn or contempt of others. Maeterlinck has said that there is nothing so contemptible as contempt. We have no right ever to feel contempt for another. Even when we see a wretched drunkard or a debased prostitute, we should feel, not contempt, but pity; for if we are wise, we must



realize that with the same heredity and the same environment we should probably have sunk quite as low." "Judge not that ye be not judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured unto you". And yet how difficult it is sometimes not to feel scorn for those that are seemingly our inferiors! But, after all, the difference between ourselves and others are more apparent than real. I often remember with profit the simple little verses of John Kendrick Bangs:

I met a little elfman once down where the lilies blow.  
I asked him why he was so small and why he didn't grow.  
He slightly frowned, and with his eye he looked me through and through.  
I'm quite as big for me, he said, as you are big for you.

Emerson gave expression to a similar thought in his version of an old fable:

The Mountain and the Squirrel had a quarrel,  
And the former called the latter little prig.  
Bun replied: You are doubtless very big;  
But all sorts of things and weather  
Must be taken in together,  
To make up a year and a sphere;  
And I think it no disgrace to occupy my place.  
If I am not so large as you,  
You are not so small as I,  
And not half so spry.  
I'll not deny that you make a very pretty squirrel track.  
Talents differ: all is well and wisely put.  
If I can not carry forests on my back,  
Neither can you crack a nut.

One peculiarity of most scoffers is that they can not bear criticism of themselves. They flush with anger even at just and well-meaning criticism. "Reprove not a scoffer lest he hate thee: reprove a wise man and he will love thee". Some philosopher has said that we should not listen to the praises of our friends, but should give ear to the criticism of our enemies. I have sometimes wished that Robert Burns' petition might be granted:

O! wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see ourselves as ithers see us,  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us  
And foolish notion.



But what an unhappy world this would be, if we all had the gift of seeing ourselves as others see us! If a good fairy offered me the gift, I am sure I should decline it. And yet I have at times been guilty of wishing that some acquaintance had the gift; but when I realized the enormity of my wish, I duly repented.

In the first Psalm we read these words:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the wicked;  
Nor standeth in the way of sinners;  
Nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

We have here a picture of progressive degeneracy. The man, against whom we are warned, first walks among sinners, then he stands in their midst, and finally he takes a seat in the company of the scornful. He has then sunk to the lowest stage of depravity, and it is well that the Psalmist should warn us against him.

But in all literature both sacred and profane, the noblest words in denunciation of Pride that I know are in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican. The Pharisee, as we know, was a member of the conservative or orthodox party among the Hebrews. The publican was a tax-collector,—a collector of taxes for the Romans,—and many of the publicans were extortioners. They were thoroughly disliked and despised by the Jews. To give a marked contrast, therefore, Jesus selects a Pharisee and a publican.

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I get. But the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote his breast, saying, God, be thou merciful to me a sinner. I say unto you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled, but he that humbleth himself shall be exalted".

Now, if overweening pride be the greatest of sins, and if we are all prone to lapse into a state of pride and self-complacency, what is the sovereign remedy? In my opinion, there is but one, and that is knowledge of the truth. If we know our neighbors, our racial conceit will fade away. If we know the poor and the unfortunate, our pride of family or of riches will disappear. If we persistently seek the truth, pride of intellect will not be ours.



Once in a moment of weakness I expressed my feelings in verse. I hope you will pardon me if I read the lines. They may seem harshly critical, but I beg you to believe that I have myself in mind rather than others.

'Twas said by Jesus: "Ye shall know the Truth,  
And Truth shall make you free". But what is Truth?  
Whenever men or nations disagree,  
Each claims the Truth. And each religion holds  
That God revealed the Truth to it alone,  
And left the rest in error. Can it be  
That some are right and all the others wrong?  
Or is Truth like the wise chameleon,  
That takes the color of each leaf and twig?  
Or like the shield that had one face of gold  
And one of silver, over which the knights  
Of old did quarrel fiercely?

The clergy teach that Truth doth never change.  
Their Truth's a brazen image of the one  
That I have sometimes seen;  
Which came to me a bright and glorious vision  
In the dark, and showed its face, and fled  
Ere I could clasp it. Many times it came,  
Nor ever seemed the same. This Truth I love.  
I love its changing moods, its smiles and tears,  
Its promises and threats.

In Jesus' ethic code  
There is one precept which the lawyers heed,  
That whosoever hath, to him is given;  
But whosoe'er hath naught,  
From him is taken even that he hath.  
'Tis theirs to see that proper laws be made  
Which rest with equal weight on rich and poor,  
And that when laws are made they be enforced.  
But like the innkeeper in Cervantes' tale,  
False knights abound, who rob the orphaned child,  
Deceive the widow, and betray their trust.  
Oh Justice! we who love thee humbly pray  
Thy eyes and ears be opened to the Truth.  
Our only hope that with thy rusty sword,  
In righteous indignation, thou shouldst drive  
The thieves and money-changers from thy Hall!

Most men still live in dread  
Of thirteen, Friday, and the crescent moon.  
Their greatest idols are the mystic Drugs;  
And if they err, they have abundant faith



The mighty Drugs will wash away their sins,  
Nor is repentance needful.  
Their priests are medicine-men, who promise health  
To all who serve the Drugs and pay the tithe.

Like aged, wrinkled crones, dim-eyed and deaf,  
Some teachers mumble tales of by-gone days,  
Forgetful of the present.  
And some there be who speak in learned terms  
Of what they do not know, to sleepy folk  
Who do not understand.  
Their pupils drone the lessons learned by rote,  
And turn for joy of life to active games.  
Their hero he who runs with winged feet,  
Or farthest drives the ball; while he is mocked  
Who loves the immortal Muses, or explores  
The vast domain of Truth.  
No wonder, then, that from the realm of Fame  
Stern Knowledge, once the king, is banished now,  
While on the throne sits idle Vanity  
And loudly blows his horn!

Am I who judge a better, nobler man  
Than they whom I condemn?  
Alas! I worship Truth, but fear it more;  
For when on it I gaze, as on the sun,  
A sudden blindness comes. 'Tis then, oh Truth,  
I fail in my allegiance!  
Oh God, remove my weakness! Grant me strength  
To speak in kindness of my fellow-men,  
To speak in Truth of self!





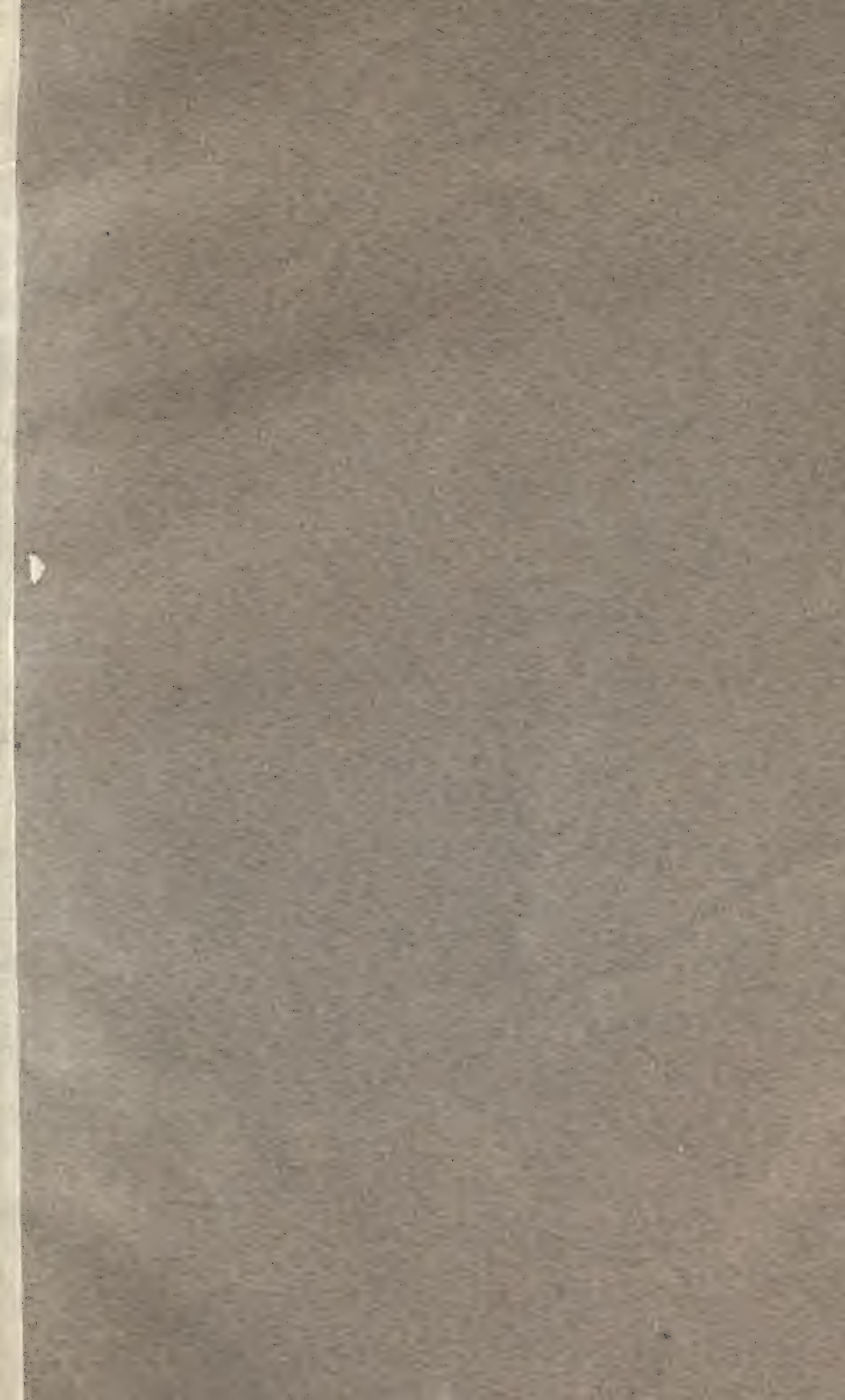






















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